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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Lowering Voting Age and Increasing Voter Participation) Bill 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. I do so in a personal capacity.

My view is that the vote in federal elections should be opened to 16 and 17-year-olds by way of a cautious, incremental path. Initially, the vote should extend to this age group on a voluntary basis. This should occur both for Senate and House of Representatives elections, and for special ballots such as plebiscites and referendums.

Some nations have already made the shift, with voting in national or local elections occurring from age 16 in Austria, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, the Philippines, Argentina, Nicaragua, Brazil and Ecuador. Voting was extended to this age in the United Kingdom for the purposes of the recent referendum on Scottish independence. The *Scottish Elections (Reduction of Voting Age) Act 2015* now extends the vote to all persons aged 16 years and older for Scottish elections generally.

Within Australia, the Northern Territory passed a law providing for the election of a Constitutional Convention to debate a new constitution. That law permits 16 and 17-year-olds not only to vote, but also to stand for the Convention.

It is notoriously difficult to get 18-year-olds to enrol and vote, in part because this can be a time of great upheaval in their lives. Many are moving from school to university or into employment, often out of home, and are forming new relationships. Joining the electoral roll can be low on their list of priorities.

On the other hand, 16 and 17-year-olds tend to be in a more stable family environment, and still at school. One key advantage of allowing them to vote is that joining the electoral roll and voting for the first time can be combined with civics education. It is a better age for gaining the knowledge and forming the habits needed to be an engaged Australian citizen.

Voting at 16 would be consistent with other changes and opportunities at this age. People under 18 can leave school, get a job, drive a car and pay taxes. They can also enlist in the Australian defence forces, become a parent and, in exceptional circumstances, get permission to marry. If the law permits them to undertake these activities, it is hard to see why they cannot also vote.

It is often argued that 16-year-olds lack the knowledge about how government works to enable them to vote, and the political maturity needed to cast an informed vote. This can be true, but these problems are not limited to this age group. Australians of all ages typically have low levels of knowledge about government and can express disinterest about politics. Indeed, in my experience 16 and 17-year-olds tend to be more passionate about the future of our nation and their democratic rights than other sections of the community.

There should not be any rush to introduce the vote for 16-year-olds. At least initially, they should be given the option of voting, rather than it being made compulsory. The vote should only be extended to young people with the desire to take a direct part in our democracy.

The strongest arguments for extending the vote to young people apply when the community is making a long-term decision that will shape the direction of the nation for future generations. This was why for example 16-year-olds were permitted to vote on whether Scotland should split from the United Kingdom.

At some point, Australians will be asked to cast a vote by way of a plebiscite or referendum on matters such as whether they support Australia becoming a republic, or otherwise on changing the nation's Constitution. Such votes can raise critical issues about Australia's identity and how the nation will be governed and its direction over the course of decades. Young people have a large stake in such questions, and so should be able to join the rest of the community in having their say. As in the United Kingdom, voting should be extended to this age group for these ballots, even if a decision is made not to extend this to them for general elections.

Yours sincerely

George Williams AO